

CHAPTER VI.

ACCIDENTAL.

When dinner was over, Lady Theobald rose, and proceeded to the drawing-room, Lucia following in her wake. From her very babyhood Lucia had disliked the drawing-room, which was an imposing apartment of great length and height, containing much massive furniture, upholstered in faded blue satin. All the girl's evenings, since her fifth year, had been spent sitting opposite her grandmother, in one of the straightest of the blue chairs: all the most scathing reproofs she had received had been administered to her at such times. She had a secret theory, indeed, that all unpleasant things occurred in the drawing-room after dinner.

Just as they had seated themselves, and Lady Theobald was on the point of drawing toward her the little basket containing the gray woollen mittens she made a duty of employing herself by knitting each evening, Dobson, the coachman, in his character of footman, threw open the door, and announced a visitor.

"Capt. Barold."

Lady Theobald dropped her gray mitten, the steel needles falling upon the table with a clink. She rose to her feet at once, and met half-way the young man who had entered.

"My dear Francis," she remarked, "I am exceedingly glad to see you at last," with a slight emphasis upon the "at last."

"Tha-anks," said Capt. Barold, rather languidly. "You're very good, I'm sure."

Then he glanced at Lucia, and Lady Theobald addressed her:--

"Lucia," she said, "this is Francis Barold, who is your cousin."

Capt. Barold shook hands feebly.

"I have been trying to find out whether it is third or fourth," he said.

"It is third," said my lady.

Lucia had never seen her display such cordiality to anybody. But Capt. Francis Barold did not seem much impressed by it. It struck Lucia that he would not be likely to be impressed by any thing. He seated himself near her grandmother's chair, and proceeded to explain his presence on the spot, without exhibiting much interest even in his own relation of facts.

"I promised the Rathburns that I would spend a week at their place; and Slowbridge was on the way, so it occurred to me I would drop off in passing. The Rathburns' place, Broadoaks, is about ten miles farther on;

not far, you see."

"Then," said Lady Theobald, "I am to understand that your visit is accidental."

Capt. Barold was not embarrassed. He did not attempt to avoid her ladyship's rather stern eye, as he made his cool reply.

"Well, yes," he said. "I beg pardon, but it is accidental, rather."

Lucia gave him a pretty, frightened look, as if she felt that, after such an audacious confession, something very serious must happen; but nothing serious happened at all. Singularly enough, it was Lady Theobald herself who looked ill at ease, and as though she had not been prepared for such a contingency.

During the whole of the evening, in fact, it was always Lady Theobald who was placed at a disadvantage, Lucia discovered. She could hardly realize the fact at first; but before an hour had passed, its truth was forced upon her.

Capt. Barold was a very striking-looking man, upon the whole. He was large, gracefully built, and fair: his eyes were gray, and noticeable for the coldness of their expression, his features regular and aquiline, his movements leisurely.

As he conversed with her grandmother, Lucia wondered at him privately. It seemed to her innocent mind that he had been everywhere, and seen every thing and everybody, without caring for or enjoying his privileges. The truth was, that he had seen and experienced a great deal too much. As an only child, the heir to a large property, and heir prospective to one of the oldest titles in the country, he had exhausted life early. He saw in Lady Theobald, not the imposing head and social front of Slowbridge social life, the power who rewarded with approval and punished with a frown, but a tiresome, pretentious old woman, whom his mother had asked him, for some feminine reason, to visit. "She feels she has a claim upon us, Francis," she had said appealingly.

"Well," he had remarked, "that is rather deuced cool, isn't it? We have people enough on our hands without cultivating Slowbridge, you know."

His mother sighed faintly.

"It is true we have a great many people to consider; but I wish you would do it, my dear."

She did not say any thing at all about Lucia: above all, she did not mention that a year ago she herself had spent two or three days at Slowbridge, and had been charmed beyond measure by the girl's innocent freshness, and that she had said, rather absently, to Lady Theobald,--

"What a charming wife Lucia would make for a man to whom gentleness and a yielding disposition were necessary! We do not find such girls in society nowadays, my dear Lady Theobald. It is very difficult of late years to find a girl who is not spoken of as 'fast,' and who is not disposed to take the reins in her own hands. Our young men are flattered and courted until they become a little dictatorial, and our girls are spoiled at home. And the result is a great deal of domestic unhappiness afterward--and even a great deal of scandal, which is dreadful to contemplate. I cannot help feeling the greatest anxiety in secret concerning Francis. Young men so seldom consider these matters until it is too late."

"Girls are not trained as they were in my young days, or even in yours," said Lady Theobald. "They are allowed too much liberty. Lucia has been brought up immediately under my own eye."

"I feel that it is fortunate," remarked Mrs. Barold, quite incidentally, "that Francis need not make a point of money."

For a few moments Lady Theobald did not respond; but afterward, in the course of the conversation which followed, she made an observation which was, of course, purely incidental.

"If Lucia makes a marriage which pleases her great-uncle, old Mr. Dugald Binnie, of Glasgow, she will be a very fortunate girl. He has intimated,

in his eccentric fashion, that his immense fortune will either be hers, or will be spent in building charitable asylums of various kinds. He is a remarkable and singular man."

When Capt. Barold had entered his distinguished relative's drawing-room, he had not regarded his third cousin with a very great deal of interest. He had seen too many beauties in his thirty years to be greatly moved by the sight of one; and here was only a girl who had soft eyes, and looked young for her age, and who wore an ugly muslin gown, that most girls could not have carried off at all.

"You have spent the greater part of your life in Slowbridge?" he condescended to say in the course of the evening.

"I have lived here always," Lucia answered. "I have never been away more than a week at a time."

"Ah?" interrogatively. "I hope you have not found it dull."

"No," smiling a little. "Not very. You see, I have known nothing gayer."

"There is society enough of a harmless kind here," spoke up Lady Theobald virtuously. "I do not approve of a round of gayeties for young people: it unfits them for the duties of life."

But Capt. Barold was not as favorably impressed by these remarks as might

have been anticipated.

"What an old fool she is!" was his polite inward comment. And he resolved at once to make his visit as brief as possible, and not to be induced to run down again during his stay at Broadoaks. He did not even take the trouble to appear to enjoy his evening. From his earliest infancy, he had always found it easier to please himself than to please other people. In fact, the world had devoted itself to endeavoring to please him, and win his--toleration, we may say, instead of admiration, since it could not hope for the latter. At home he had been adored rapturously by a large circle of affectionate male and female relatives; at school his tutors had been singularly indulgent of his faults and admiring of his talents; even among his fellow-pupils he had been a sort of autocrat.

Why not, indeed, with such birthrights and such prospects? When he had entered society, he had met with even more amiable treatment from affectionate mothers, from innocent daughters, from cordial paternal parents, who voted him an exceedingly fine fellow. Why should he bore himself by taking the trouble to seem pleased by a stupid evening with an old grenadier in petticoats and a badly dressed country girl?

Lucia was very glad when, in answer to a timidly appealing glance, Lady Theobald said,--

"It is half-past ten. You may wish us good-night, Lucia."

Lucia obeyed, as if she had been half-past ten herself, instead of nearly twenty; and Barold was not long in following her example.

Dobson led him to a stately chamber at the top of the staircase, and left him there. The captain chose the largest and most luxurious chair, sat down in it, and lighted a cigar at his leisure.

"Confoundedly stupid hole!" he said with a refined vigor one would scarcely have expected from an individual of his birth and breeding. "I shall leave to-morrow, of course. What was my mother thinking of? Stupid business from first to last."